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SUBJECT: VISIT TO SANDF 46TH BRIGADE ACOTA TRAINING

¶1. On February 26, Deputy Political Counselor visited the greater Johannesburg headquarters of the South Africa National Defense Force (SANDF) 46th Brigade to witness in progress a two-week computer-aided command post exercise conducted under the auspices for State Department's African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) program. The visit was coordinated through the Pretoria Office of Security Cooperation and State Department contractor Northrop Grumman: Training and Simulation Group.

¶2. The 46th brigade commander, Brigadier General Mahlobo, welcomed DepPolCouns with a briefing and led the tour of the brigade HQ. He expressed gratitude for the high level cooperation between the 46th Brigade and the ACOTA team. General Mahlobo told us his senior staff officer, a colonel who had served with the United Nations Mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), had been fully engaged in custom-designing the command post exercise underway. Mahlobo said he was very pleased with ACOTA approach to training and mentoring and would welcome further opportunities to work with us. Mahlobo and the Colonel escorted POLOFF through the various base locations involved in managing the complex situation underway in the fictional nation of "Redland."

¶3. The SANDF Colonel who guided our tour had a major role in designing the exercise. The atmosphere in the various command locations was one of real-time crisis management taking place among the various teams. The simulation units were comprised of about 20-30 South African officers working in several sub-command locations and a groups of 50-60 in the command operations center. At each location civilian ACOTA trainers and uniformed U.S. Marines were advising as the South Africans made decisions. Communication between the SANDF and the advisors seemed very good. The attention to detail in making the situation seem real extended to role-playing exercises involving dealing with NGO's, media, clergy, displaced people, and UN bureaucracy, while managing a major engagement with hostile forces. The ACOTA team's effort at projected verisimilitude extended to the publication of a virtual newspaper. This attention to detail appeared to help keep attention levels high and engagement focused.

¶4. The following are a few examples of the situations SANDF officers were called upon to manage as part of the exercise: battlefield surveillance, media interviews, a fuel truck accident, a convoy blocked by civilians, an attack on a convoy, a minefield discovered, a car bomb, a mass grave reported, several incidents requiring medevac. The SANDF officers said the command post exercise was good preparation for their upcoming deployment. Elements of the 46th Brigade are expected to serve in headquarters in Burundi and Sudan peace support operations.

¶5. Meeting with DepPolCouns after the tour, members of the ACOTA team stressed that the program's strong point was its custom design to meet the needs of the 46th Brigade. The combination of retired U.S. military contractors and younger active-duty U.S. Marines struck us a particularly effective approach to mentoring. Poloff learned that the Marines had volunteered for TDY duty to support the ACOTA effort and learn about peace support operations in Africa. The ACOTA team explained that while many SANDF reservists have experience in peace support, our command post exercise is helping many officers make the transition from commanding in the field to serving in a headquarters unit. The team was looking forward to returning to South Africa to conduct ACOTA training exercises at the Qreturning to South Africa to conduct ACOTA training exercises at the SANDF artillery and infantry schools.

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